

Studying abroad as a young adult is often an emotional and challenging experience for people of all backgrounds. We may find ourselves confronting and culturing a new identity or becoming more comfortable representing one that we already possessed. For heritage students- or heritage seekers- this confrontation is often a central motivation for studying abroad.

Heritage students, also called heritage seekers, are students that choose to travel to and study in a country with which they have cultural or ethnic ties. Students may have been born in this country or their families may have originated there, but the point is often for students to further understand or reconnect with their own cultural or ethnic identity. This experience may be especially emotional and exhausting for heritage students, as it challenges the most personal aspects of a student's identity. Often the obstacles the student must confront are vastly different from those of non-heritage seekers, as are the perspectives and expectations of both types of student. For these reasons, it is important that heritage students prepare themselves for this unique and incredibly valuable study abroad experience.

Not all heritage students are the same. Though each of us desires to understand ourselves and where we come from to a greater degree, our lived experiences of our identities differ greatly. Cultural and ethnic identities are often associated with the color of our skin, whether we speak our country's native language, or the culture with which we were raised. But we know that identities are not necessarily so polarized. Minorities and people of color in the United States often experience a "white-washing" of their identity in an attempt to conform to the majority culture, or their native languages are hidden and silenced for a fear of discrimination. Many people of color, especially of mixed heritage, are also considered white-passing, where their skin color allows them to move through society as if they were white when in reality they are not. Those of us that find ourselves under this title often feel guilt or disconnect from our heritage. All of these factors, and many more, come in to play for heritage students studying in their native country.

#### Questions to consider before going abroad:

*It is important to realize that the manner in which we ourselves identify may differ from how we are perceived in our host/home country.*

- Language
  - Is language considered part of the cultural identity of this country?

- Do I speak my host/home country's language?
- Did I grow up speaking this language or did I learn it in school?
- Customs and culture
  - Was the culture in which I was raised different from the culture in my host/home country?
  - What are my perceptions of the culture in my host/home country?
  - How do the values with which I was raised differ from those in my host/home country?
  - Have I previously visited or lived in my host/home country?
- Perception
  - Will I be perceived as one of the locals or as a foreigner?
  - How will these differences in external perception affect my perception of myself?
  - Will I be treated differently from the non-heritage students in my program, and, if I am, will this cause me discomfort?

Questions to consider while abroad:

- Expectations
  - Am I expecting more from myself and/or is more being expected of me (e.g. linguistically, behaviorally, culturally, etc.), than other non-heritage students?
  - Am I putting excessive pressure on myself to fit in because of my cultural or ethnic background?
  - How should I feel if other students look to me as the “expert” even if I do not feel that way or have never been to my host/home country?
- Perception
  - Am I being perceived as a local or as a foreigner by my host community?
  - Does my perception by others depend on the situation?
  - Am I made uncomfortable by this difference in perception (if there is one)?
  - Do I feel discriminated against for my identity (often perceptions of race are very different from what we expect in our host/home countries; often darker skin connotes lower class in countries where the majority are of darker skin)?
  - How should I react if someone incorrectly identifies or rejects my identity?

Questions to consider upon return:

- Do I view my identity as different from how I viewed it when I left?
- Do I feel more or less comfortable in my own skin?
- Has my understanding of my own culture increased and, if so, in what ways?
- Have I, or do I desire to, discuss the developments in my identity with my family?
- Do I feel more connected to my heritage and to my family?

It is important to remember that these experiences are different for every individual. There is no right or wrong answer to how we cope with confronting our identities. What we gain from these experiences is personal and unique and will help shape us into who we hope to become.

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For more information and resources, please contact the [Swarthmore Off-Campus Study Office](#) or see the [Diversity and Inclusion Guide](#) for heritage students by Diversity Abroad.

There are also many articles available written by and about heritage students on their experiences, including the following:

- Haynes, Cecilia. [Neither Here nor There: The Reality of Heritage Study Abroad](#). Go Overseas. 18 August 2014.
- IFSA-Butler. [Unpacked: A Study Abroad Guide for Students Like Me](#). “Racial and Ethnic Identities.”
- Chin, Kellie. [Being Caribbean in Cuba: Part 1](#). Unpacked: A Study Abroad Guide for Students like Me.
- Chin, Kellie. [Being Caribbean in Cuba: Part 2](#). Unpacked: A Study Abroad Guide for Students like Me.